

HISTORY OF 108 BHAJANS - by Suruj Rambachan.

When Bhakti Became Seva

A Personal Journey Through the Hindu Awakening of Trinidad and Tobago

There are moments in a person's life when an idea does not seem to be conceived so much as received.

For me, the idea of singing 108 bhajans continuously was one of those moments.

On seven occasions I sat down and sang 108 bhajans without interruption, sometimes for more than nine hours. These were not concerts. They were not performances undertaken for applause. They were acts of devotion—Bhakti transformed into Seva—in which my voice, my time and my endurance became an offering for charitable purposes.

But the story of the 108 Bhajans did not begin in 1986.

Its roots go much further back—to a village temple, to my parents, to the Saraswati Kirtan Mandali, to the arrival of the Sai Baba movement in Trinidad, to the Hindu awakening of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, and even to a remarkable dream I had as a teenager.

Looking back, I sometimes wonder whether all of these events were separate—or whether they were chapters in one unfolding journey.

The boy who did not sing

I did not begin singing as a child.

Indeed, I did not sing publicly until I was about seventeen.

In our village stood what was then known as the Avocat Hindi Temple, today called the Siddhi Vinayaka Mandir. For as long as I can remember, the annual Ganesh Festival there was celebrated over ten nights. The final night was an all-night affair, with bhajans continuing until approximately four o'clock in the morning. At dawn, the murti of Lord Ganesha was carried from the temple to the floodgate at St John's Trace, where the appropriate pujas were performed before the murti was immersed in the river.

The temple was also a centre for yagnas.

One of the visiting pundits was Pundit Krishna of Caroni, as he was popularly known. I loved listening to him sing, particularly the bhajan "Jai Jai Jai Tripurari."

Then, sometime around 1965, I had an experience that has remained etched in my memory for more than sixty years.

I dreamt that I was sitting in the front yard of my grandfather's home on Siparia Old Road. My grandfather, Pundit Goberdhan, was the village leader and head of the village panchayat.

In the dream I saw the chariot of Lord Krishna.

Krishna was seated in it.

The colours of the chariot were extraordinary.

The memory remains vivid even today.

I cannot explain the experience.

But after that, something changed.

I began to sing.

My brother Anant and I initially accompanied ourselves with two five-pound ghee tins tied together with a red cloth to make a makeshift bongo drum.

Then my beloved uncle Roopnarine Rambachan bought us a shiny green bongo drum.

My grandfather, Pundit Rambachan, went to Dass Store in San Fernando and bought us a grip-type harmonium.

And so, almost without our realizing it, the journey began.

Saraswati Kirtan Mandali

In April 1966, my mother Chanrewtee and my father Deoraj, together with several elders including Pundit Agyaram, founded the Saraswati Kirtan Mandali.

The group was taught the Sandhya Puja by the Dhaniram family of Siparia Old Road, who were Arya Samajists. We were Sanatan Dharma Hindus, but we learned from them.

That was an early lesson for me.

Hinduism in Trinidad has always been strengthened by people learning from one another.

For twenty-two years, our base was the Avocat Temple. We practised every Wednesday and held service on Sunday mornings.

The Mandali became one of the most sought-after bhajan and kirtan groups in Trinidad.

We travelled throughout the country.

Sometimes we hired two buses because more than forty people were travelling with us. More often it was my father's Jeep and a Cortina car he had bought for me that carried us from one satsang to another.

My brother Anant and later my brother Brahmanand, who became a pundit, played dholak.

Balroop Roopchan eventually joined us and became another outstanding dholak player. We were among the first groups to have two dholaks playing simultaneously and in perfect unison.

Balroop eventually began singing while accompanying himself on the dholak and became an outstanding bhajan exponent.

We had three remarkable female chorus singers—Leelawatee Komal, Sumintra and Doda.

Mighty was our kartal specialist.

Mack played manjeera.

I played harmonium.

The Mandali was more than a musical group.

It became a vehicle through which devotion travelled from village to village.

From radio to records

Our first radio appearance was on Radio Trinidad.

On television we were first presented by Suruj Pat Mathura.

Then, in 1970, Balroop Mungal recorded us in a makeshift studio upstairs at the Scarlet Ibis Hotel.

The equipment was modest—a six-channel Shure amplifier. Harry Mahabir and his band arranged and played the music, while Richard Neebar played dholak and tabla.

The recording became treasured by bhajan lovers.

One song in particular, “Ram Krishna Hare Mukunda Murari,” taught to us by Sant Keshvardas, remains memorable.

On that LP, “Ban Se Aaja Ram Ghar Aaye” was sung ten times.

When Sant Keshvardas visited Trinidad, he would ask us to sing.

My father would take us in his Jeep to his lectures. We learned his kirtan and were privileged when he asked our group to accompany him with chorus.

I did not know it then, but these experiences were preparing me for something much larger.

The Hindu awakening

The 1960s, 1970s and 1980s were extraordinary decades in the history of Hinduism in Trinidad and Tobago.

The Hindu Seva Sangh emerged as a Hindu youth-oriented organization.

The Society for the Promotion of Indian Culture developed at UWI St Augustine.

The Divine Life Society, under the inspiration of Swami Satchidananda, helped transform the presentation of Hindu worship and philosophy.

Swami Satchidananda encouraged havans in homes and produced material to guide householders. He also published an early Romanized bhajan book that became a staple for singers and helped establish organized bhajan and satsang groups throughout Trinidad.

At the same time, university graduates began bringing Hindu philosophy into a new public arena.

Anantanand Rambachan, now an internationally respected Hindu scholar, studied Vedanta under Swami Dayananda Saraswati after joining the monastery of Swami Chinmayananda in Bombay.

A virtual yatra of knowledge followed.

Yagnas became teaching sessions.

Some were held at the University of the West Indies, even during the Christmas period and sometimes for two weeks at a time.

Anantanand's soft bhajans during these lecture series were soothing and inspiring.

Looking back, I see two complementary movements.

The satsangs represented our Bhakti movement.

The lecture series represented our Gyaan movement.

I was fortunate to participate in both.

The arrival of Sai Baba

The arrival of Sri Sathya Sai Baba's teachings in Trinidad in the 1970s created an extraordinary interest in bhajan singing.

The songs were simple, memorable and infectious, but behind that simplicity were profound teachings about love, service, truth and the unity of faiths.

From 1974 onward, the Saraswati Kirtan Mandali and I became deeply involved in the Sai bhajan and kirtan movement.

We travelled across the country.

We conducted satsangs.

We sang.

We preached.

We helped encourage the formation of numerous Sai kirtan groups.

A devotional movement began to spread.

The atmosphere at those satsangs was infectious. Attendance was enormous.

There was a Hindu awakening of mammoth proportions.

There was also a Hindu reformation.

The rituals were simple—flowers, Aarti and, in many places, havan. The music attracted thousands.

For many, Sai Baba's message was a new gateway into Hindu spirituality.

And the bhajan was the vehicle.

I never became a functionary

There is something unusual about my relationship with the Sai movement.

I never became part of a formal Sai organization.

I remained independent.

I sang.

I conducted satsangs.

I spoke about the teachings.

I travelled.

I served.

Perhaps that independence allowed me to move across different Hindu communities and traditions without being confined by institutional boundaries.

My loyalty was to Dharma and Seva, not to organizational position.

And this becomes important when we come to the 108 Bhajans.

Because the idea did not come from an organization.

No committee asked me to do it.

No institution commissioned it.

It came to me.

The Ramayana Yagna in Felicity

In 1986, I was conducting a seven-night Ramayana Yagna at the home of Mr and Mrs Ramsundar Parshuram in Felicity.

The Parshuram family were deeply devoted to Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Mr Parshuram had sought Baba's blessings to conduct the seven nights of satsang and Ramayana discourses, and I had been invited to deliver them.

In addition to singing the verses of Tulsidas, I shared Sri Sathya Sai Baba's interpretation of the Ramayana from Summer Showers in Brindavan, particularly the symbolism contained in the epic.

The attendance was extraordinary.

Each night in Felicity drew more than 1,000 people.

On the final night, more than 2,000 people attended.

Similar crowds would later gather in Rio Claro and Chaguanas. At times the crowds were so large that television sets had to be placed downstairs because people could not fit into the halls.

It was during those nights in Felicity that a thought came to me:

Why not sing 108 bhajans continuously?

I did not devise a plan.

I did not calculate how long it would take.

The thought simply came.

And it would not leave me.

Was it Sai Baba?

Here the story moves from history into faith.

I cannot prove what caused that thought.

But I can tell you what I believe.

The first 108 Bhajan Mala was held at the Sai Centre in Marabella—the first official Sai Centre established in Trinidad.

That fact has always struck me as significant.

From 1974 onward, I had been deeply involved in the Sai bhajan movement. I had travelled, sung and helped spread the movement's devotional music throughout Trinidad.

Then, in 1986, during a Ramayana Yagna, the idea of 108 bhajans came to me.

And when I finally acted upon it, the first one took place at the first official Sai Centre in Trinidad.

Was it coincidence?

Perhaps.

But I have come to see it differently.

I believe Sai Baba guided me to the 108 Bhajans.

I cannot prove it.

I do not need to.

Faith is not always about proof.

Sometimes guidance comes as a thought that refuses to disappear.

Sometimes it comes as an inexplicable impulse.

Sometimes it comes through a door that suddenly opens.

And sometimes, perhaps, it comes through a bhajan.

The first 108 Bhajans

In 1986, I sat down at the Marabella Sai Centre.

And I sang.

For nine hours and fifteen minutes.

Robbie Rooplalsingh, Tej Ramlogan and Balroop Roopchan provided the tabla and dholak accompaniment.

Their fingers sometimes bled from the sheer intensity and duration of the playing.

But the singing continued.

Bhajan after bhajan.

108 times the human voice rose in praise.

There was no shortcut.

There was no performance trick.

There was only endurance, devotion and the conviction that the singing itself was an offering.

That first experience established what became the 108 Bhajan Mala.

I subsequently undertook six more.

Seven in all.

When singing became Seva

One session was conducted upstairs at the 2001 Carpet House in Chaguanas under the title "Ahuti."

At the end of each bhajan, the Gayatri Mantra was chanted and an offering was made into the sacred fire.

Part of the session was broadcast live on Radio Trinidad, hosted by Moean Mohammed.

Another 108-Bhajan session was held in Couva for the Rotary Club to raise funds for medical assistance for children.

Seventy-seven thousand dollars was raised.

Another was held at the Divine Life Society in Carlsen Field, hosted by Pundit Ramdath Vyas.

That session raised \$110,000, which became the first major contribution towards the construction of the Vyas complex and Devi Mandir on Caroni Savannah Road.

These figures are important.

But they are not the heart of the story.

The heart of the story is what happened when people discovered that devotion could become practical service.

A bhajan could become medicine.

A song could become a contribution towards a child's medical care.

Nine hours of singing could become a building.

A voice could become an offering.

That is Seva.

Did 108 Bhajans help revive bhajan and kirtan?

There is a question worth asking:

Did the 108 Bhajan Mala contribute to the revival and popularization of bhajan and kirtan singing in Trinidad and Tobago?

I would not claim that one person or one group created that revival.

The Hindu devotional tradition in Trinidad is much older.

Our pundits, temples, mandalis, Divine Life Society, Hindu Seva Sangh, Sai organizations and countless families had been singing for generations.

The revival was collective.

But perhaps the 108 Bhajan Mala became one of its distinctive expressions.

It demonstrated that devotional singing could be:

dynamic, participatory, energetic, contemporary and charitable.

A bhajan did not have to be something sung for a few minutes between rituals.

It could fill a hall.

It could bring thousands together.

It could be broadcast on radio.

It could raise substantial sums for charity.

It could attract young people.

It could communicate philosophy.

It could create community.

It could simply make people happy.

Perhaps the 108 Bhajan Mala helped reinforce the idea that bhakti could be an experience rather than merely an observance.

From Bhajan Mala to Bhajan Jamming

Today we hear the expression “Bhajan Jamming.”

The terminology is different, but I sometimes wonder whether we are witnessing the flowering of a seed planted decades ago.

“Jamming” suggests spontaneity, rhythm, participation, musical exchange and collective enjoyment.

Yet underneath it is something ancient:

people coming together and singing the name of God.

The instruments may be different.

The sound systems may be better.

The language may be different.

The venues may be different.

The generations may be different.

But the impulse remains the same.

Sing together.

Remember God together.

Experience joy together.

I would never claim that today’s Bhajan Jamming was created by the 108 Bhajan Mala.

History is rarely that simple.

But I believe the 108 Bhajan Mala was part of the continuing evolution of devotional music in Trinidad and Tobago.

Perhaps it helped demonstrate that bhajan could be dynamic without losing its spirituality; contemporary without abandoning tradition; and joyful without losing its sacred purpose.

Perhaps the Bhajan Mala was one of the bridges between the traditional kirtan and the participatory devotional culture we see today.

Why was the 108 Bhajan Mala successful?

There is another question that deserves consideration.

To what extent was the success of the 108 Bhajan Mala influenced by the person who was singing?

I was not known only as a bhajan singer.

At different stages of my life I was a university lecturer, a management consultant, a politician, Mayor of Chaguanas, a government minister and an Ambassador.

These identities might seem far removed from sitting behind a harmonium and singing devotional songs for nine hours.

Perhaps that was precisely what made the sight so compelling.

A university lecturer could sing.
A management consultant could sing.
A mayor could sing.
A minister could sing.
An ambassador could sing.
A public figure could sit before a harmonium and become simply a devotee.
There was no podium.
No parliamentary chamber.
No diplomatic reception.
No university lecture theatre.
Just a singer, musicians, devotees and the name of God.
Perhaps people saw something important in that.
It demonstrated that modern education, professional achievement, public service and Hindu devotion were not contradictory.
A person could inhabit the modern world without abandoning his spiritual inheritance.
And perhaps the public identity gave the event another dimension.
People who knew me through politics could come.
People who knew me through the university could come.
People who knew me through community work could come.
People who knew me through the Sai movement could come.
People who knew me only as a singer could come.
The 108 Bhajan Mala brought these worlds together.
But there was another important ingredient.

I was not merely speaking about devotion. I was submitting myself to it.
Nine hours of singing cannot be sustained by a public image.
It requires discipline.
It requires endurance.
And ultimately it requires surrender.

The paradox of the public figure

There is a paradox here that I find fascinating.
The more public positions I occupied, the more the 108 Bhajan Mala demonstrated that those positions did not define me completely.
The lecturer became the singer.
The politician became the devotee.
The ambassador became the bhakta.
The minister became the servant.
The public figure became an ordinary human being before God.
Perhaps that was part of the appeal.
It said something important about Hinduism in modern Trinidad:

There is no contradiction between intellect and devotion.
There is no contradiction between public service and spiritual service.
There is no contradiction between professional achievement and humility before God.

The people behind the singer

There is another part of this story that must never be forgotten.
Although I sat down alone to sing the 108 bhajans, I was never alone.
My wife, Nandini, stood behind me.
So did my children, Adi and Ranjana.
A nine-hour devotional undertaking is never truly a one-person undertaking.
There is preparation.
There is organization.
There is travel.
There is equipment.
There is the emotional commitment of a family that understands that someone they love is giving an entire day—and sometimes much more—to devotional service.
Nandini understood.
Adi and Ranjana understood.

They allowed my religious commitments to become part of our family life.

Therefore the 108 Bhajans belong to them too.

The singer may sit before the microphone, but behind that microphone there is often a family carrying part of the burden.

Seva is rarely the achievement of one person.

The people who made the journey possible

Nor could I have made this journey without the many devotees and friends who supported the work.

The Parshuram family opened their home to the Ramayana Yagna that helped give birth to the idea of the 108 Bhajan Mala.

Mr Ramsundar Parshuram showed me extraordinary generosity. He filled and compacted land for me at Ramsaran Park as a gift.

I remain deeply grateful.

The Ramoon Sajeewan family of Piarco supported the Sai Baba satsangs I conducted for perhaps fifteen years.

Ramoon and his family brought microphone systems to satsangs and never charged a penny.

He invested in excellent Shure vocal microphones because he wanted the singing to sound its best.

His wife Chan and their sons and daughters remain dear family friends.

Some of the largest satsangs were conducted at the St Helena Sai Centre and at the home of his brother Himraj Maharaj.

My satsangs were also enhanced by the excellent Bose sound system provided by my great friend Indar Ramlochan and his son Prashant.

When Indar set up a sound system, it did not squeak!

Gyanie and her daughter Priya have sung alongside me for more than forty years.

These relationships are not incidental to my story.

They are the story.

Satsang and the people karma brings

There is a beautiful verse from Bhaja Govindam:

Sat-sangatve nissangatvam,
nissangatve nirmohatvam;
nirmohatve nischalatattvam,
nischalatattve jivanmukti.

Through the company of the good comes detachment; through detachment comes freedom from delusion; through freedom from delusion comes steadiness of mind; and through a steady mind comes liberation while living.

When I look back at my life, I see something of the truth of that teaching.

Perhaps karma does bring people together—not simply to settle old accounts, but to help one another advance.

The people who entered my life through music, satsang, Ramayana, Sai Baba and Hindu service were not merely companions on a journey.

They became part of the journey itself.

The English bhajan

There was another challenge confronting Hinduism during those decades.

Hindi as a spoken language was declining.

Yet bhajans became one of the great carriers of Hindu identity.

English bhajans were introduced into Hindu education and satsang. Songs such as “Have No Fear and Fight Your Battle of Life, Arjuna” and “O Children of Noble and Ancient Culture” conveyed the teachings of the Ramayana, the Gita and other Hindu scriptures.

Some traditionalists objected.

But history has perhaps vindicated the underlying instinct.

After more than 175 years of Hindu presence in Trinidad and Tobago, we remain a vibrant Hindu community even though only a small minority of Hindus speak Hindi fluently.

The bhajan helped preserve us.

It carried memory when language was fading.

It carried philosophy when formal instruction was limited.

It carried devotion from one generation to another.

The bhajan became a vessel of cultural survival.
I recorded bhajans in English in Trinidad and India, including the Hanuman Chalisa.
The intention was always the same:

If language changes, let Dharma remain understandable.

Rejection did not end the service

There were also moments when I experienced rejection by established institutions.
There were occasions when I was told where I could sing and where I could not.
There were disagreements over Sai bhajans.
There were objections to English bhajans.
There were institutional doors that sometimes closed.
I remember these things.
But I have tried not to carry them as burdens.
When I was asked to contribute to the reconstruction of a temple from which I had been excluded from delivering lectures, I still contributed.
When later I had the opportunity to assist with improvements to a temple, I did so.
Why?
Because I have never believed that service to God should depend upon whether human beings approve of the person serving.

God is not the property of an institution.
I have never wanted to be a pundit.
I have never claimed to be one.
What I have wanted is to make Hindu teachings understandable and meaningful to ordinary people.

I sing because the bhajan reaches places where a lecture cannot.
I speak about the Ramayana because I believe people deserve not only ritual but understanding.
And I serve because service itself is worship.

What does 108 really mean?

People may ask why I chose 108.
The simplest answer is:
The thought came to me, and I followed it.
But perhaps there is a deeper meaning.
One hundred and eight bhajans demand something from the singer.
The first hour is devotion.
The third hour is discipline.
The fifth hour is endurance.
The seventh hour becomes surrender.
And somewhere beyond fatigue, something changes.
The singer stops thinking about the number.
The body becomes tired.
The voice becomes an instrument.
The mind becomes quieter.
The singing becomes prayer.
That is when the Bhajan Mala ceases to be a musical event.
It becomes tapasya.

Seven journeys of song

I have done it seven times.
Seven occasions.
Seven offerings.
Seven journeys of the voice.
Sometimes the singing continued for nine hours or more.
But the true measure was never the number of hours.
It was the lives touched.
The funds raised.
The children helped.
The temples strengthened.

The friendships formed.
The young people who discovered Hinduism through a song.
The elderly who heard a familiar bhajan and remembered their parents.
The person who came for the music and stayed for the message.
The person who arrived with a problem and left with hope.
That is the real measure.

Looking back

When I look back to that young boy who did not sing until he was seventeen, I sometimes marvel at the journey.
I see the two ghee tins tied together with red cloth.
I see the shiny green bongo given to us by my uncle.
I see the harmonium my grandfather bought.
I see my parents forming the Saraswati Kirtan Mandali in 1966.
I hear Pundit Krishna singing Jai Jai Jai Tripurari.
I hear Sant Keshvardas.
I hear the dholaks.
I hear the chorus.
I see the buses carrying devotees across Trinidad.
I see the packed halls.
I see the university lectures.
I see the yagnas.
I see the Sai satsangs.
I see the Ramayana discourses.
And eventually I see myself sitting down to sing 108 bhajans.
Nine hours and fifteen minutes.
Then another occasion.
And another.
Seven times.
Perhaps the most extraordinary part of the story is not that I could sing for nine hours.
It is that a thought that came during a Ramayana Yagna in Felicity in 1986 became a form of devotional service that helped others.

The next generation

And now we are talking about Bhajan Jamming.
Perhaps this is the most satisfying part of the story.
The bhajan did not disappear.
It evolved.
A new generation has taken the devotional impulse and given it another expression.
The instruments may be different.
The arrangements may be different.
The venues may be different.
The language may be different.
But the essence remains.
People are still gathering.
People are still singing.
People are still finding joy in the Divine Name.
And perhaps the 108 Bhajan Mala was one small part of that long continuum.
I would never claim that today's Bhajan Jamming was created by me.
That would diminish the many people who have contributed to the continuing evolution of Hindu devotional music in Trinidad and Tobago.
But I am proud to have been part of the journey.
Perhaps we planted a seed.
Others watered it.
Others gave it sunlight.
And now another generation is enjoying the flowering.

Bhakti becomes Seva

Ultimately, however, I do not want the 108 Bhajans to be remembered as a personal record.
It was never about proving that I could sing for nine hours.
It was never about applause.

It was never about establishing myself as a great singer
It was about something much simple

Bhakti becoming Seva.
My voice was given to me.
The bhajans were given to me.
The musicians were given to me.
The friends were given to me.
The family was given to me.
The opportunities to serve were given to me.
What, then, could I do except give them back?
Perhaps that is the real meaning of a Bhajan Mala.
One hundred and eight songs are sung.
But in the end, it is not the songs that are offered.

It is the singer.

And perhaps that is why, after all these years, I still believe that the thought of 108 did not really originate with me.
Perhaps it was placed in my mind.
Perhaps Sai Baba guided me.
Perhaps the journey had been prepared long before I understood it.
The boy who saw Krishna's chariot.
The teenager who began to sing.
The parents who founded the Saraswati Kirtan Mandali.
The musicians who travelled with us.
The devotees of Sai Baba.
The scholars and teachers who helped awaken Hindu thought.
The families who opened their homes.
The wife and children who stood behind me.
The seven Bhajan Malas.
The thousands who listened.
The charities that benefited.
And now the young people who gather for Bhajan Jamming.
When I look at all of it together, I see not a series of disconnected events but one long thread of grace.
A thread that began with a song.
And perhaps, God willing, will continue long after the singer has stopped singing.
The bhajan did not end.
It changed its form.
And perhaps today's jam is simply the next verse.

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